

A Few Thoughts About GIS Certification, at a Glance...

by John Hickok, September 28, 2011

Licensure, as in the case of Civil Engineers and Land Surveyors, is a legal act on the part of states to safeguard life, health, property, and the public welfare. In rapidly evolving technologies like GIS, it is more common to see certification as a means to determine one's proficiency. **Certification** is official recognition of a person's professional integrity and competence in a chosen field by his or her peers. While licensed professional behavior is governed by state laws, certified individuals voluntarily follow codes of ethics that are universally adhered to across state and international boundary lines.

GIST: The GISTechnology is the academic community's answer to GIS certification. GIS programs are offered by a number of colleges and universities, including [USC](#) and [Rio Hondo Junior College](#). GIS programs may vary greatly between the schools that offer them. [CSUN's program](#), proposed to begin in 2012, is intended to complement their Master of Public Administration (MPA) Program.

ESRI: [The company](#) now certifies our working knowledge of their software via a series of 2.5 hour exams. [Their certification program](#) is relatively new, starting in January 2011. Ethics, experience, and formal education are not addressed; ESRI states that their program complements other programs.

GISP: The [GISCI](#)'s certification is based on analyses of highly documented resumes (portfolios) of candidates by teams of outside professionals with a wide collective variety of expertise. Originally formed under the direction of [URISA](#) in 2004, the GISCI currently represents [five member organizations](#). This certification program is well established with nearly 5,000 GISP's in existence, with over 340 of them living in California.

ASPRS: [The Society](#) has been instrumental in the formation of U.S. federal standards for photogrammetric deliverables since the 1930's. In the 1970's, certification was pioneered as a means of dealing with varying state laws' inability to address rapidly evolving technologies. In 1991, the program was expanded to include the [Certified Mapping Scientist, GIS/LIS](#). At the professional level, [ASPRS certifications](#) require education, experience, and examinations similar to those of a civil engineer or land surveyor. Their exams require overlapping knowledge of GIS, Remote Sensing, Photogrammetry, and other academic areas. Though not as prevalent as the GISP, ASPRS certification is required for obtaining certain federal government contracts.

Final Miscellany: A good read is an [article by Sheila Wilson](#), Executive Director of the [GISCI](#). Her article, published in the Spring 2011 edition of ESRI's [ArcNews](#), explains how GISP and ESRI certifications complement each other. On a legal note, the terms "GISP" and "GIS Professional" are registered trademarks of the GISCI, while ESRI-certified individuals receive digital logos which may be placed on their business cards, email signatures, etc.

An Abbreviated GIS Certification Matrix				
	ASPRS	GISP	ESRI	GIST (CSUN)
Issued by	ASPRS	GISCI (AAG, NSGIC, UCGIS, URISA, and GITA)	ESRI	CSUN (programs in other schools may greatly differ)
Professional and Technical Levels	Yes	Professional only	Yes	Professional only
Experience Required	6 years for the professional level	4 years minimum; points awarded based on type of experience	n/a	n/a
Education Required	4 year degree in a physical science for the professional level	4 year degree desired, but not required; core GIS courses to be included	ESRI suggests taking courses they offer	4 year degree required before enrollment in the program
Exams Required	Exams include core and overlapping knowledge areas	n/a	2.5 hour exam for each software knowledge area	Not less than a "C" in any course; minimum 3.0 GPA in the program overall
Contributions to the Profession	Part of the recertification criteria, active status	Candidates are required to participate in professional organizations, encourage and educate others	n/a	n/a
Code of Ethics	Yes	Yes	n/a	Yes
Renewal Period	5 years	5 years	n/a	n/a